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BUREAU OF
INTELLIGENCE
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ASSESSMENTS
AND
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(U) VIETNAMESE "EXPORT" OF LABOR TO
THE USSR AND EASTERN EUROPE

(C) Summary

Although differing considerably on details, intelligence reports make it clear that Vietnam is sending laborers to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe under the guise of "labor cooperation" or technical training. The importation of "guest workers" into the USSR and Eastern Europe is not new. But the Vietnamese, who have received training in Soviet bloc countries for many years, had not been involved strictly as laborers before 1980. Estimates of the numbers involved in the new Vietnamese program vary, reaching as high as 500,000. Many reports say that a portion of their wages is being withheld to cover Vietnamese debts.

Participants apparently consist of "reliable" northerners and unemployed southerners. Indirect forms of coercion probably have been involved in recruiting some candidates, but there is no evidence to confirm rumors reported by refugees that active dissidents or former reeducation camp inmates are prime targets for export. It certainly is possible that some from these two groups have been forced to go and that coercion may increase if it proves difficult to meet quotas. These quotas presumably have been expanded under agreements signed over the past six months. This expansion will facilitate wider dissemination of details of the program within Vietnam and, in due course, they will be reported outside by refugees or travelers.

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State Dept. review completed

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RDS-1,2 3/25/02 (multiple sources)

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"Labor Cooperation" Agreements; Expanded Airline Service

(C) The current Vietnamese program to export labor to the USSR and Eastern Europe apparently got under way during 1980 and subsequently has expanded, possibly even before September 1981 when the first public bilateral agreement on "labor cooperation" was signed with Czechoslovakia. An indication that the program is qualitatively different from past vocational training abroad is the fact that these are independent "labor" agreements, whereas previous training was subsumed under traditional technical, scientific, and educational exchange accords.

(C) The Czechoslovak agreement followed a proposal made in the summer to Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach which was reported in the Prague press. No details of the agreement were published, however, and subsequent accords were likewise uninformative. For example, the November 1981 agreement with the USSR was described only as being on "labor cooperation and intensified training of technical workers." Agreements with Bulgaria and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) were signed in Hanoi in November 1981 and January 1982, respectively.

(S/NF/NC) A Soviet-Vietnamese accord "on the movement of citizens" between the two countries, signed last July, may have been intended to handle substantially increased movements of Vietnamese. Subsequently, there was an increase in flights between the USSR and Hanoi, and the Czechoslovak airline reportedly began weekly flights between Prague and Hanoi with a connection to East Berlin. In addition, Bulgarian airlines have instituted flights between Sofia and Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) which have been explicitly linked to the movement of workers, according to knowledgeable sources.

(S/NF) Numbers Vary

The number of people involved in the export program appears significantly greater than that of any previously known type of arrangement between Vietnam and Soviet bloc states. In 1981, an East German diplomat placed the number of Vietnamese in Eastern Europe at 55,000; other East European diplomatic sources claim that the figure for Eastern Europe and the USSR may grow to 500,000 in the next few years. Current refugee estimates range as high as 500,000.^{1/} A November 1981 British press report quoted

1/ (C/NF) [redacted] claimed that 500,000 had already been exported in 1980 and that plans called for a million more in 1981.

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a Vietnamese Embassy spokesman who said that the number of workers to be sent to the Soviet bloc under the 1981 agreements might reach 100,000 over the course of the current five-year (1981-85) plan. This figure sounds plausible and is the same one used by a pro-Hanoi Vietnamese publication in Paris which, however, treated the program as simply an expansion of past vocational training arrangements.

Purpose: Debt Repayment and Training

(S/NF) The export of surplus Vietnamese laborers to the USSR, GDR, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria is a practical arrangement in light of the degree of unemployment in Vietnam, the labor shortages in these Soviet bloc countries, and Vietnam's considerable debt to these countries. Siberia is a logical destination for the work force going to the USSR, because of its manpower shortages on industrial development and oil and gas projects.

(U) The importation of "guest workers" into the USSR and Eastern Europe is nothing new. In 1972, for example, Bulgaria signed an agreement--though never implemented--with Egypt to import Egyptian labor. An agreement with Yugoslavia in 1973 brought Yugoslav construction workers to Bulgaria. Bulgaria, among the least developed of the European members of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CEMA), for years has exported labor to the USSR (thousands of Bulgarians still cut timber in the Komi ASSR), Czechoslovakia, and East Germany. And, in the mid-to-late 1970s, the USSR contracted for workers from Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, and Poland to help build the Orenburg natural gas pipeline (a CEMA-wide investment project on Soviet territory).

(S/NF) Although the Vietnamese privately stress the benefits of such "labor cooperation" in training underskilled workers, an important motivation for the program clearly is repayment of the substantial debts Hanoi has incurred for imports and developmental assistance. The vehicle for repayment is the partial withholding of laborers' wages. According to one report, the ratio is 40 percent for the worker to 60 percent for debt repayment. Only two reports have mentioned the wage level: one saying that the level would be the same as in Vietnam, and the other that in the USSR it would be less. In either case, it is possible that the exported workers could have a standard of living comparable to or better than that in Vietnam with its low wages and rampant inflation.

(C/NF) Participation Mixed; Coercion Difficult To Document

Available information on participation in the program comes almost exclusively from refugee sources, which are often con-

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flicting and sometimes clearly exaggerated. (These reports are summarized in the Appendix.) According to this information, workers for the program are drawn mainly from two categories: northern Vietnamese considered "reliable," and unemployed southerners. For northern Vietnamese, the program is evidently an expansion of previous training arrangements. For participants from the south, however, the program is more aptly described as the exporting of labor. These individuals are drawn from the large pool of skilled and unskilled unemployed workers for use in a purely labor capacity which, nevertheless, may have some training benefits. For example, Hanoi probably hopes that those employed on Siberian oil and gas projects will gain skills for use on Vietnam's own projects, if and when the latter get under way.

Although the possibility exists that the program includes political dissidents and individuals drawn from reeducation camps, there is no firm evidence of this. Nor is there information to substantiate refugee rumors that the program is designed as a punitive measure targeted against such groups. Because it is highly doubtful that the Soviet Union or any other bloc country would be willing to accept large numbers of "unreliable" workers within their borders, it seems improbable that dissidents or reeducatees would form a significant proportion of the "guest workers."

The widespread rumors of reeducatee involvement in an "export" program to Siberia began to be reported by refugees only in the latter part of 1981--after the BBC (and possibly others) broadcast to Vietnam news accounts of Vietnamese laborers being exported to the USSR and Eastern Europe. Thus, in the absence of firsthand accounts, the veracity of refugee reporting on this subject must be viewed with caution, because such stories may be self-serving.

Nonetheless, some degree of coercion likely is involved in "recruitment" in the south of participants for the program. The extent is difficult to determine, however, because of the scarcity of good intelligence. The most reliable information available is the report of a Ho Chi Minh City public security officer who said that individuals unwilling to participate in the program were faced with the threat of being forced to move from Ho Chi Minh City and change their trades. The degree of future coercion probably will be directly related to the strictness of quotas for the program and the ease with which they can be filled. Vietnamese cadre in both parts of the country are faced with competing demands for labor--for the draft as well as for the "New Economic Zones" being revived. Neither program is popular and may have even less appeal to segments of the populace than labor abroad.

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Vietnamese Sensitivity

(U) The Vietnamese clearly are sensitive to the suggestion that they are providing indentured or "slave" laborers to Eastern Europe and the USSR. Thus, with the exception of two obscure accounts in a Hanoi newspaper, the matter apparently has not been mentioned in the media. The first account, published in July 1980, reported a farewell party given by the Minister of Labor for the "first wave" of Vietnamese workers leaving for East Germany. It mentioned that they had attended lectures on various subjects, including the "policy on sending workers and cadres abroad to upgrade their skills." The other, published in December 1981, complained that workers selected for "cooperative labor" were being overcharged for inferior photographs for passports and identity cards. These were required by the "International Cooperation Department" which, judging from the first article, is an office in the Ministry of Labor charged with handling the worker export program.

(S/NF) The Vietnamese Foreign Ministry apparently has provided guidance for diplomats on how to respond privately to such reports. Several representatives have said that the program is simply an expansion or extension of existing plans for training workers who would return to Vietnam when the training was completed. This reaction contrasts sharply with a report that Foreign Minister Thach told the Director of the World Food Program in January that 250,000 Vietnamese workers were already in the USSR and Eastern Europe and 60 percent of their wages was being withheld by the Soviets. Thach, however, is given to hyperbole on occasion. In this instance, his motives in breaking with past denials apparently were to suggest dissatisfaction with Moscow and encourage the notion that Western aid would help break Moscow's monopoly and increase Vietnamese independence.

(LOU) Outlook

The signing of labor agreements with Soviet bloc countries suggests that Hanoi is prepared to increase the number of workers to be sent abroad. If the program does in fact expand and run smoothly, details on the arrangements should become more widely known within Vietnam, and more information may become available from refugees and other sources. Moreover, Hanoi itself would be under increasing pressure to deal openly with the subject.

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